

2.0 Affected Environment and Natural Resources of Concern

The Santa Clara River is a wonderfully dynamic and exciting river. It is also one of the last of the more natural rivers in the southern California region. It flows from east to west, fed by a number of streams flowing south out of the San Rafael and Santa Ynez Mountains, and streams flowing north out of the San Gabriel and Santa Susana Mountains in the Transverse Range in Ventura and Los Angeles Counties. The Santa Clara River surface flows and channel width vary over the course of the year dependent on agricultural and domestic water use, wastewater discharges, rainfall and subsurface flows. It may be a raging river during the wet season and an intermittent stream during the dry months. It braids and winds its way for approximately 100 miles from the headwaters in the San Gabriel Mountains to the Pacific Ocean, with a watershed covering 1600 square miles.

In pre-Columbian times, the indigenous Chumash and Tataviam people lived along the Santa Clara River. The culture of these Native Americans was closely tied to the land, using sustainable land management practices for food production, shelter, basketry and medicine. In 1782, Spanish priests established the San Buenaventura Mission with the development of land along the river for crops and livestock. During the first half of the 1800s, the raising of livestock on large ranchos became the dominant occupation along the river. Over the later half of the 1800s, land use along the river shifted from ranching to agriculture. Oil enterprises also became established during this time. The 1900s brought the railroad, road and bridge construction, sand and gravel mining, increasing population, urban development and commercial growth. These historical changes have resulted in habitat destruction and fragmentation, decreased water quality, diversion of surface and groundwater, channelization, encroachment into the floodplain of the river, and the introduction of non-native plant and animal species.

Although the riparian resources of the Santa Clara River were compromised by activities that have occurred over the last two centuries, significant areas of native riparian habitat still exist along the river. These include beach, alkali marsh, southern foredune, active channel, mule fat scrub, southern willow scrub, southern willow riparian woodland, southern cottonwood-willow riparian forest, arrow weed scrub, alluvial scrub, big sagebrush scrub, and valley freshwater marsh and ponds. The upland riparian habitats that exist along the Santa Clara River include coastal sage scrub, chamise chaparral, coast live oak woodland, and juniper woodland.

A diverse variety of wildlife and plant species is associated with these habitat areas, some of which are sensitive species. Sensitive species are those that are either federally or state listed as endangered or threatened, candidates for listing as endangered or threatened, and those species considered rare or species of special concern by other local public and private resource agencies. There are seven plant, one insect, five fish, eighteen bird, two amphibian, six reptile, and three mammal species considered to be sensitive in the watershed. The sensitive plants include Peirson's morning-glory, Nevin's barberry, slender-horned spineflower, short-joint beavertail cactus, Ventura marsh milkvetch, Ojai fritillary and salt marsh bird's beak. The sensitive fish include the unarmored threespine stickleback, arroyo chub, Santa Ana sucker, southern steelhead trout and tidewater goby. The sandy beach tiger beetle is the sensitive insect found in the Santa Clara River watershed. The sensitive birds are the western least bittern, western snowy plover,

California least tern, elegant tern, long-billed curlew, white-faced ibis, bank swallow, Belding's savannah sparrow, least Bell's vireo, southwestern willow flycatcher, yellow warbler, yellow-breasted chat, loggerhead shrike, western yellow-billed cuckoo, white-tailed kite, Cooper's hawk, northern harrier and sharp-shinned hawk. The sensitive reptiles and amphibians are the San Diego horned lizard, two-striped garter snake, south coast garter snake, southwestern pond turtle, silvery legless lizard, coast patch-nosed snake, arroyo toad and California red-legged frog. Finally, the sensitive mammals of the Santa Clara River watershed include the mountain lion, Townsend's big-eared bat and western mastiff bat.

In 1769, Father Juan Crespi recorded his observations of the Santa Clara River. He wrote about "tall and thick cottonwoods and oaks," and an "arroyo with a great deal of water which runs in a moderately wide valley, well grown with willows and cottonwoods." The biological diversity of habitats and associated wildlife can be promoted through restoration efforts. The restoration efforts that will be implemented through this Restoration Plan will compensate for the injured natural resources from the oil spill while at the same time enhancing and maintaining more of the historical and natural biological diversity of the Santa Clara River watershed.